

# **Bertolt Brecht's Main Concerns in Mother Courage and Her Children**

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## **Abstract**

*Mother Courage and her Children* is one of the great theatrical productions during the Second World War . It represents Bertolt Brecht’s serious attempt to criticize war and capitalism at a time when cruel dictators such as Hitler were shedding blood mercilessly .

This study concentrates on Brecht’s major issues and his moral concerns that he tackles in *Mother Courage and her Children*. We’ll try to show how and why Brecht attacks war and its consequences . The study consists of three sections. Section I is an introduction in which some light is shed on Brecht’s contribution to the epic theatre. It is also talks briefly about Brecht’s artistic development and his achievements. Section II is devoted to the critical analysis of *Mother Courage and her Children* in relation to Brecht’s major concerns in this play . Some close references to the play are made to support our argument . To enrich our analysis some critical views are investigated . Section III gives a conclusion to the whole study and sums up its findings .

## **Section I : Introduction**

Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956) is considered one of the most representative dramatists of the epic theatre . Brecht’s epic theatre “ is a theatre of parables and similies, of masques and fairy tales. Almost always the action takes place in far-away settings ...”.<sup>1</sup> The epic theatre

flourished in Germany during the 1920s . Brecht expresses his concept of the epic theatre saying :

The essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feeling than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things . At the same time it would be quite wrong to try and deny emotion to this kind of theatre .<sup>2</sup>

Brecht wrote his plays at a time of great artistic , political and social confusion not only in Germany but also in the whole world . He uses a fresh , individual dramatic language to present something intelligible and serious . Brecht's plays appeal to our minds rather than to our hearts . This rationalism is one element of Brecht's concept of the epic theatre . But this does not mean that his plays have no emotions .

Brecht's plays can be divided chronologically into three groups . The first group were written in the wild and whirling spirit of the twenties. They are full of excitement and satire . The best example of this group of plays is *The Threepenny Opera* . The second group of plays are characterized by a contrast with the earlier plays . They are known as the didactic plays of the thirties . The best plays of this group are , perhaps, *The Exception and the Rule* (1930) , and *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1933). These plays are cool , stark and precise . The third group of plays were written before and during the Second World War . They represent Brecht's major plays . They combine the best of the earlier styles . They reflect Brecht's creative energy as a dramatist . The most famous plays of this group are *Mother Courage and her Children* (1938) , and *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1943) .

The most obvious feature of Brecht's work is its reflection of a consistent social and political point of view . This appears in his themes which are war , crime , murder , rape , drink , prostitution and mob

violence . Some of these themes are reflected in *Mother Courage and her Children* . In a note to Scandinavian audiences Brecht states :

As I wrote I imagined that the playwright's warning voice would be heard from the stages of various great cities , proclaiming that he who would sup with the devil must have a long spoon .... Writers cannot write as rapidly as governments can make war, because writing demands hard thought.<sup>3</sup>

Brecht wrote *Mother Courage and her Children* in a direct response to the escalating conflict in Europe . Raymond Williams sees that in *Mother Courage* , as a play , Brecht raises an ironic central question : “ What else can we do , here , where blind power is loose , but submit, chisel , try to play safe ?”<sup>4</sup> Brecht , as an active supporter of humanity , chooses not to submit , on the contrary , he makes it very clear that he wished not only to make the Germans think about their blind involvement in Hitler's war but also to help them in rebuilding their shattered culture . The critical analysis of *Mother Courage and her Children* in the following section will concentrate on the main concerns of Brecht in this play .

## **Section II: Mother Courage : A Symbol of a Fallen World**

*Mother Courage and her Children* opens in Dalarna , a province in Sweden in 1624 . This resort to a remote past helps Brecht to depict the horrors of war and its devastating effects upon people objectively . The Swedish army is recruiting for a campaign in Poland . This is the background upon which the story of the play depends . Mother Courage, the main character in the play , runs a canteen wagon that follows the army from one place to another . She sells drinks , clothes and other items to the soldiers . She has two sons : Eilif and Swiss Cheese , and a mute daughter , Kattrin .

A Recruiting Officer and a Sergeant are trying to find men for the Swedish army . As a responsible artist , Brecht's warning voice against war is demonstrated in the very first speeches in the play :

Recruiter :    How can you muster a unit in a place like this ?  
                  I've been thinking of suicide , Sergeant ...  
                  people round here are so nasty I can't sleep  
                  nights . S'pose I get hold of some bloke and  
                  shut my eye to his pigeon chest and varicose  
                  veins , I get him proper drunk , he signs on the  
                  line , I'm just setting up , he goes for a piss ,  
                  I follow him to the door because I smell a rat ;  
                  bob's your uncle , he's off like a flea with the  
                  itch . No notion of honour , loyalty , faith ,  
                  sense of duty .<sup>5</sup>

The Recruiting Officer is complaining that it is impossible to recruit the required number of men for the war . He wants to commit suicide because he is disappointed . He sees that the people have no moral virtues . According to the Officer , who is a war agent , young people should submit to the needs of war ; otherwise , they have no moral virtues. This is the philosophy of the dictators in the world . Brecht is asking the spectator to think about this idea . The Sergeant , another war agent , of course , agrees with the Recruiting Officer saying that people need a good war because it forces them to be organized . Just then Mother Courage's wagon approaches pulled by Eilif and Swiss Cheese . The Sergeant stops them for he wants to recruit Eilif for the army . Mother Courage tries to prevent the involvement of her son in the war and its consequences .

Brecht makes it clear in this situation that though Mother Courage adapts herself to war , she cannot keep herself away out of it . Her involvement in the war is inevitable for she could not take part in it and at the same time keep aloof from it . But , of course , she is blind to this contradiction . Her conversation with The Sergeant shows her pride in her name :

Mother Courage :  
Courage is the name they gave me  
because I was scared of going broke,  
sergeant, so I drove me cart right  
through the bombardment of Riga with  
fifty loaves of bread .<sup>6</sup>

The Sergeant , however , mocks her saying she is a hypocrite for making money on the war but not allowing her sons to take part in the military service . He attacks her materialistic and selfish tendencies . He judges her situation according to a soldier's point of view . His words are quite true :

Oh , you'd like war to eat the pips but spit out the apple ? It's to fatten up your kids , but you won't invest in it . Got to look after itself , eh ? And you called Courage , fancy that . Scared of the war that keeps you going ?<sup>7</sup>

This is precisely a critical analysis of Mother Courage's situation . She is trying to exploit the war so as to profit from it . She is selfish and egocentric in that she subscribes to the capitalist principles and tries to avoid their consequences . As she is feeding the war she contributes to the horror , the chaos and the suffering of the world in which she lives.

Pretending to be able to predict the future, Mother Courage takes two pieces of parchment and puts a black cross, which is a symbol of death , on one of them ; the other she leaves blank . She puts them in a helmet and makes The Sergeant draw . He gets the black cross . This means he is going to die . He is upset . Mother Courage , then , draws lots for all her children . She predicts doom for her whole family . Even the manner of her children's death is provided . Eilif is to die in war , Swiss Cheese's death is due to his honesty , and Kattrin's death comes as a result of her revolt against remaining mute . Thus , the deeply moving tragedy of Mother Courage is foreshadowed in the very first scene of the play.

The Sergeant feigns interest in one of Mother Courage's goods , a belt. Mother Courage's attention is distracted by this small transaction . At this very moment , she loses Eilif for the Recruiting Officer takes him to be the first victim of war . The Sergeant's synical note which ends scene I comes quite to the point :

Like the war to nourish you ?  
Have to feed it something too .<sup>8</sup>

Brecht creates ironic use of business deals in almost every scene in the play . Mother Courage loses Eilif when she is negotiating the price of a belt, and the peasants are defeated by Eilif when he pretends to negotiate the price of their cattle with them . In a highly dramatic scene, Mother Courage loses Swiss Cheese when she haggles too much the price to save his life . Through these ironic situations Brecht is telling the audience that if you try to do business with the army , you lose everything eventually . Mother Courage never learns this lesson .

Time passes and the war is going on . Three years later Swiss Cheese is recruited for the army . He is responsible for the regimental cash box . This is due to his honesty . He refuses to tell the enemy who he is or where the cash box is hidden . For the first time in his life he refuses to tell the truth , and he is shot as a result . He is too honest to betray his trust, he has to die . Through the death of Swiss Cheese Brecht comments ironically on the value of great virtues which are represented by the character of this honest man . His death undermines what he represents.

Swiss Cheese has been shot when his mother is negotiating with Yvette Pottier , the prostitute , the price of his life . Mother Courage has to pay two hundred guilders to save her son's life . She thinks this is too much . After a long time of argument , and having realized that she has no better choice , Mother Courage yields: "Tell him I'll pay two hundred.

Hurry ! I reckon I bargained too long.”<sup>9</sup> When she comes to an agreement with Yvette , it is too late . Her son has been shot and his corpse is brought on the stage in front of his mother who refuses to acknowledge him . She is unable to change her nature .

In *Mother Courage and her Children* Brecht frequently uses songs to make poignant observations and address the issues that the spectators are to think of . Songs are used to interpret the story in an objective tone . They spring from the normal development of the action .

The Song of the Grand Capitulation in Scene 4 functions as advice for the young soldiers. The song demonstrates the anger of a young soldier who has been cheated of his tip . It is full of sympathy . It describes life as inevitable disillusionment of all individual desires for happiness . The world is presented as a place in which small human plans for happiness collapse because the whole world lacks planning and moral virtues. This condition reflects the absurdity of all attempts to bring sense and order into a senseless and chaotic world .

One of the main concerns of Brecht in *Mother Courage and her Children* is the Bible . Through the character of The Chaplain , Brecht presents a sarcastic picture of how the Bible fails society in wartime . The Chaplain first appears on the stage glorifying war . He rebukes The Cook, a repulsive opportunist character , for frightening Mother Courage by hinting at the possible death of Eilif. The Chaplain alleges that this is a holy war . He argues with The Cook saying :

Don't give way to your feelings , cook . To fall in a battle is a blessing , not an inconvenience , and why? It is a war of faith . None of your common wars but a special one , fought for the faith and therefore pleasing to God .<sup>10</sup>

The falsehood of The Chaplain is heavily stressed when the canons and guns roar . He is terribly frightened ; “Indeed , if the enemy is so close as that it might be dangerous . Blessed are the peacemakers is the motto in wartime . If only I had a cloak to cover me .”<sup>11</sup> Instead of providing others with spiritual comfort , this false clergyman thinks only of saving himself from danger . This is why he remains with Mother Courage chopping wood and pulling the wagon like an animal . He escapes capture by disguising himself as Mother Courage’s tapster and handy-man . Brecht wants to say that such false clergymen corrupt the Christian morality .

The most famous description of Mother Courage in the play is given by The Chaplain when he calls her the “hyaena of the battlefield.”<sup>12</sup> This is very true because Mother Courage , like the hyaena , feeds on the war .

As she has predicted earlier , Mother Courage's second son is going to be swallowed by the war. Eilif is a daring son who is bent on a soldier’s life. War turns him into a ruthless killer . He is rewarded because he cuts the poor peasants savagely into pieces so as to loot and lay hands on their cattle . The Commander praises him saying : “You’ve the makings of a young Caesar . You ought to see the King .”<sup>13</sup> But when Eilif repeats the same action in the time of peace , he is condemned to death . He cries in self-defence : “It’s what I did last time ain’tit ? Tell her [his mother] it wasn’t any different , tell her it was the same thing.”<sup>14</sup>

Brecht successfully creates an ironic juxtaposition of Eilif dying for committing a crime during peace and Mother Courage’s announcement that war is back again : “peacetime’s over . War’s been on again three days now . Heard the news before selling me stuff , thank God. They’re having a shooting match with Lutherans in town . We must get cart away at once . Katrin , pick up !”<sup>15</sup> The irony is that Eilif did a



crime that has been considered heroic during war , but an atrocity during peace . Mother Courage thinks that Eilif is clever and brave and the war could not get him . She is , of course , mistaken because she fails to realize that the peace can get him , and it actually does . Eilif's fault is that he is unable to distinguish between the moral values of war and the moral principles of peace.<sup>16</sup> Brecht is telling the audience that peace threatens Mother Courage with destruction .

After the loss of her two sons , Mother Courage is left only with her mute daughter , Katrin . Now it is Katrin's turn to meet her tragedy. This dumb girl symbolizes the oppressed tormented people. This innocent daughter is obsessed by a strong desire for love and motherhood. She suffers from compassion . But she is never an idiot . She is quite normal in a world that is abnormal . It has terribly deformed her .

In Scene 6 Mother Courage sends Katrin with The Clerk to buy some goods for their wagon . On her way back somebody attacks her. Her face is terribly wounded . When she arrives , her mother receives her with compassion:

What happened , someone assault you ? On way back ? She was assaulted on her way back . Bet it was that trooper was getting drunk here . I shouldn't have let you go , love . Drop that stuff . Not too bad , just a flesh wound you got , I'll bandage it and in a week it'll be all right . Worse than beasts , they are .<sup>17</sup>

Mother Courage patches up her daughter . Then she gives Katrin a present of red boots , but Katrin ignores them and crawls in the wagon .The Chaplain remarks that there will be a scar that never fades from Katrin's face , he does not blame those who wounded Katrin's face , he puts the blame elsewhere : "It's not them I blame . They never went raping back home . The fault lies with those that start wars , it brings

humanity's lowest instincts to the surface ." <sup>18</sup> This is partly true , but those who wounded Katrin should not be exempted from blame and punishment . It is worth adding here is that even Katrin's dumbness is a result of war because a soldier had stuck something in her mouth as a child .

The degeneration of her looks will certainly diminish Katrin's chance to become a mother . Having lost the ability to marry and have children , Katrin's only recourse is to save other people's children . She is going to pay a heavy price for her compassion for others .

In one of the most dramatic scenes in *Mother Courage and her Children* , Katrin climbs up on the peasants' roof and sacrifices her life for the peasants' safety . She wants to save the town from the enemy soldiers . She awakens the sleeping town of Halle with her drum. The soldiers shoot her for she refuses to stop drumming. Her death is meant to shake the audience by telling them that those who refuse to capitulate should be punished . Katrin's death makes her the tragic hero of the play. This is how one of the most famous critics comments on Katrin's death: "The desperate urgency of the real preservation of life , is articulated only in the drumming of the dumb girl , to waken and save the city." <sup>19</sup> Katrin is the only character in the play who protests violently against war . She could not remain silent . She is to be contrasted with her mother .

Brecht contrasts Katrin's action with the prayer of the peasants. Driven by her sympathetic nature and her anger against the pains of war, Katrin sacrifices her life at a moment at which peasants consider their fatal situation as inevitable and escape to pray . They pray to get help from elsewhere . When suddenly help comes , the pious resignation of the peasants is violated by a savage attack upon the little mute girl . The infantry officer gives the order loudly :

*"Set it up ! Set it up !" calls up while the gun is being erected : "For the very last time : stop drumming !" Katrin , in tears , drums as loud as she can . "Fire !" The soldiers fire . Katrin is hit, gives a few more drumbeats and then slowly crumples .*<sup>20</sup>

Though Katrin is present in every scene of the play , she is never able to dominate until now . Her drumming louder and louder reflects her decision not to give in . Her action , however , speaks louder and more effective than the words of any other character in the play . Katrin's dominant virtue is her unselfishness and it is closely linked with her frustrated maternal instincts . In this memorable character Brecht puts much of himself . I do agree with Eric Bentley when he states : "If Brecht put some of himself into Katrin and she sums up Brecht the activist and lover of mankind , he put even more into his passive and negative heroine, Mother Courage the coward ."<sup>21</sup>

Brecht in many ways is telling the spectators that Katrin represents the ideal person ; she is what we should all strive to be. However , she is unable to succeed in the harsh world that fails to thank her for saving other people from death . Like her brothers , Katrin is shot while her mother is doing business in the town .

When Mother Courage comes back from town , the peasants tell her about her daughter's death which she refuses to believe: "I think she's going to sleep ." <sup>22</sup> The shock is too much for her . But she has inured herself to suffering . She decides to follow her business . Martin Esslin argues that there is no hope for Mother Courage's transformation into a better character when he aptly says: "Brecht insisted that Mother Courage was a negative character, a profiteer who sacrifices her children to her commercial instinct and cannot learn from her experience . But the audience never fails to be moved by her fate."<sup>23</sup> It is not whether Mother Courage , as a person , to be admired or despised . The point is not what

we feel about her hard opportunism; it is what we see in the action of the play . We've got to think of its results . The audience have to see the play "as a story about themselves, the common victims of war, doubtlessly recognizing in the dilemmas of the play its own recent condition in war-torn Berlin."<sup>24</sup> One by one she loses her children and now she is alone. She harnesses herself to the wagon saying : "Hope I can pull cart all right by myself . Be all right , not much inside it . Got to get back in business again ." <sup>25</sup> *Mother Courage and her Children* ends with a song of a group of soldiers . They sing about how the war enslaves and starves them , but they have no other choice than fighting .

### **Notes**

1 Franz Norbert Mennemeier's "Mother Courage and her Children" in Peter Demetz (ed), *Brecht : A Collection of Critical Essays* , (Prentice-Hall , Englewood Cliffs , N. J., 1962) , p.138 .

2 Cited in John Willet , *The Theater of Bertlot Brecht* , (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1967), p. 168 .

3 "Introduction" to Bertlot Brecht : *Mother Courage and her Children*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim , London : Eyre Methuen , 1980), p. ix. All subsequent quotations from the play are based on this edition .

4 Raymond Williams , *Modern Tragedy* , (London : Chatto & Windus, 1966), p. 198 .

5 Brecht , *Mother Courage and her Children* , scene 1 , p. 3.

6 Ibid., scene 1 , p. 5 .

7 Ibid., scene 1 , p. 9 .

8 Ibid., scene 1 , p. 13 .

9 Ibid., scene 3 , p. 42 .

10 Ibid., scene 3 , p. 25 .

11 Ibid., scene 3 , p. 28 .

12 Ibid., scene 8 , p. 64 .

13 Ibid., scene 2 , p. 18 .

14 Ibid., scene 8 , p. 69 .

15 Ibid., scene 8 , p. 70 .

16 See Abdalla A. Metwally, *Studies in Modern Drama*, (Beirut: Bouhairy Brothers , 1971), p. 14.

17 Brecht , *Mother Courage and her Children* , scene 6, pp. 57-8 .

18 Ibid., scene 7 , p. 58 .

19 Raymond Williams , *Drama From Ibsen to Brecht* , (London : The Hogarth Press , 1968), p. 86 .

20 Brecht , Mother Courage and her Children , scene 11, p. 86 .

21 Eric Bentley , (ed) , Seven Plays By Bertolt Brecht , (New York: Grove Pres , Inc., 1961), p. Xliii .

22 Brecht , Mother Courage and her Children , scene 12, p. 86 .

23 Martin Esslin , Brecht : A Choice of Evils . A Critical Study of the Man and his Work and Opinions , (London : Heinemann , 1959), p. 264.

24 J. L. Styan, Modern Drama in Theory and Practice, Vol.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press , 1981) , p. 159 .

25 Brecht , Mother Courage and her Children , scene 12, p. 87 .

### **Section III : Conclusion**

With an uncommonly sharp and critical eye Brecht has analyzed the problems of his time . He is mainly concerned with the presentation of the catastrophes of war in an attempt to warn people against them . The damnation of materialism , violence , bloodshed , apportunism and selfishness represents a major concern of Brecht in the play . He attacks these social and political ills because they turn life into an immoral struggle for survival . In this sense the world has no place for virtuous people such as Swiss Cheese and Kattrin . Actually , Mother Courage and her Children is an assault against war that swallows the guilty and the innocent alike . Kattrin and Swiss Cheese are the only virtuous characters in the play ; their death is meant to undermine what they stand for . Eilif's crimes illustrate how the poor people can be used as fuel for the war . Through Eilif's role in the play Brecht makes an ironic attack against all soldiers who pretend to fight for glory and honour.

Mother Courage is a war profiteer whose devotion to business costs her the death of her children . Like a hyena , Mother Courage cannot live without war . Her wagon is used as a symbol to illustrate a tendency to destruction which is deeply rooted in life . The wagon is present in every scene to emphasize the questionable richness of Mother Courage . The spectators are asked to think and focus attention on the real world and its injustices . This is a fallen world when despotic rulers , such as Hilter, are loose and their lust for power and bloodshed has no limits. This is a world

against which there is no rebellion for the individual. Katrin rebels, but she has been shot. However, she leaves a great impact upon the audience. We admire her martyrdom because she dies for a great cause. Her dumbness and the violation of her beauty reflect the cruelty of the world. It is a place in which even religion has been falsified. The loss of true religious and moral principles is an important concern of Brecht in the play.

Mother Courage is meant to be a symbol of those agents who live and prosper on war . Brecht is telling such people that war will eventually devour them. The spectators are to recognize that though Mother Courage loses all her children, she fails to see the light . Basically she does not learn anything because of her obstinate insistence on doing business with the war. Finally, Mother Courage and her Children is Brecht's honest call for an urgent change of the world to save humanity .

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